

This issue of FEANTSA's *Homeless in Europe* magazine presents our readers with a collection of articles about outreach work with homeless people. Outreach street work is a crucial part of supporting people in homelessness for multiple reasons. First, outreach can **reach homeless people on their territory and in their terms**, as people are often unable or do not feel comfortable with reaching out to social services in established locations or where a high number of individuals gather. Outreach also allows for **access to a large spectrum of places** where homeless people find refuge and can lead social workers to meeting people who live in cars, camps, temporary motels, shelters, libraries, parks, abandoned buildings, under bridges, in encampments or on the streets – **going wherever people are!** Importantly, outreach workers find themselves at **the middle ground** between the most marginalised and often underserved individuals in homelessness and the services who could come to their support for accessing housing. It is a privileged position that makes it possible to create relationships of trust and to facilitate contact between homeless people and social services. It is also a position which comes with great responsibility, which involves listening to people and following the direction they want to go in, allowing them to lead and fully participate in the process.

Without attempting to provide a clear definition of outreach work – since this can mean different things, as demonstrated by the articles from this summer 2021 edition – we wish to underline (non-exhaustively) the important **principles that guide outreach work**, as they have been presented by organisations implementing such work.¹ These principles include: Building a human connection; Giving choice; Allowing people to lead; Allocating time; Being non judgemental, flexible, persistent and patient; Being empathic, reliable and honest; Offering unconditional help; Being prepared and informed; Being available; Valuing regularity, partnership and diversity; as well as dignity, respect, and honesty.

Trust relationships are not easy to establish, especially with people who are in marginalised situations or who have been repeatedly disappointed and rejected by society and often by services that are supposed to help them. It is therefore of utmost importance to implement these principles when conducting outreach work with homeless people. Creating the human connection involves valuing

1 https://www.sandiegocounty.gov/content/dam/sdc/hhsa/programs/bhs/TRL/TRL%20Section%202/HOW_BestPractices.pdf
<https://www.homeless.org.uk/sites/default/files/site-attachments/Changing%20Lives%20Outreach%20Guidance%20and%20Templates.pdf>
<https://www.homelesshub.ca/solutions/emergency-response/outreach>

EDITORIAL



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people's experiences and allowing them the time and space to open up and lead the way for the support that they need. It also means being patient, persistent and flexible. Along with flexibility, showing empathy and NOT pre-judging people has proved to be crucial for establishing relations of trust with people in vulnerable situations. Outreach workers are also professionals who possess information about where to guide people and services from where support can be obtained. Creating partnerships with social services and other organisations is therefore a must. In the same way, it is essential to develop an understanding of individuals' personal circumstances, from their personal history to their cultural specificities and linguistic needs, as well as being respectful and aware of the importance of diversity among the homeless population (e.g. in terms of sexual orientations, gender identities, disabilities, racial and ethnic communities, etc).

A primary value of outreach work is that it can develop in a wide range of areas, allowing for the flexibility to follow people where they want and need to go. Outreach work can lead social workers to situations or places they would not have imagined themselves: a garage for confiscated cars, looking for a backpack containing old family photos, because it was the only belonging of a homeless man who was picked up together with the old, rusty car where he was sleeping; or, inside a prison picking up the entrance ticket for the festival where a homeless woman was planning to recycle beverage recipients; or, in a court room to show moral support to homeless persons who were tried for begging.

Outreach services can be diverse, and they develop either in the way they are implemented or in specific areas. It is the work done with (not for or to) homeless people which happens outside the traditional setting of the homeless shelter services, on the street. In recent times however, a digital component of outreach has grown allowing outreach workers to keep contact with beneficiaries via online methods (determined to some extent by the coronavirus health crisis). Services offering medical care and harm reduction on the spot have also been developed through medical outreach teams taking to the streets. During the coronavirus pandemic, outreach teams have also acted as advocates for vaccine take up among the homeless population. Employing diverse staff with linguistic skills makes it possible to reach migrants who live in destitution and homelessness, while the work of the outreach teams can be enriched through volunteering and creating relationships of equity.

Outreach can mean passing on information and referring homeless people to other services, but it can also involve transportation and accompaniment, depending on people's needs. Outreach workers offer people care, practical help and social relationships – even if the only need is to lend an ear and listen to people's hardship or acting as next of kin for individuals in specific situations. Through outreach an improved access to justice can be obtained, by facilitating people's access to legal counsel. Outreach work can also play a role in improving access to other support services as it can serve as a bridge between people and services.





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The relational approach to care work recognises the importance of relationships between staff members and clients and values the role that these relationships can play in transforming people’s lives. Outreach work always takes such a relational approach emphasising how central these positive relationships between clients and staff are and how relationships are underpinned by trust and connectedness and are non-judgemental. In outreach work the focus is on the client’s priorities rather than those of the service. It is much easier to adapt outreach efforts to individuals’ needs than other forms of service delivery e.g. in contained, site-based services whose boundaries and structures can make it difficult to meet clients on their terms.

This does not mean, however, that the challenges faced in outreach work are fewer. It is difficult for an outreach worker to grow this type of trust and prove they are reliable, especially when there is a lack of

services for them to draw support from – where can you go to obtain help for a homeless person if there are no offers and solutions? This creates a limitation in building the crucial trusting relationship that provides a basis for progress in the outreach work. Frustration also builds among workers when this limitation appears repeatedly. It can also be tough when people are not reachable or available, which can translate into long walks without meeting anyone (or anyone who is ready to talk). But once people are reached and trust is gained, an important bridge has been built. This is why perseverance and kindness are important and why outreach workers are essential in the process of lifting people from homelessness.

We would like to thank all the contributors for their work and the articles written to this issue of *Homeless in Europe Magazine*.

